

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: May 10, 2012

Agenda Item: Milk River Ranch Acquisition (Region 6, Hill County)

Division: [Wildlife]

Action Needed: Endorse Course of Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

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Background: The 4,500-acre Milk River Ranch, located along the Canadian border, 50 miles northwest of Havre, sprawls across a diverse combination of Milk River bottom, native grassland and rugged prairie breaks. These habitats support upland game bird populations, along with deer, antelope, raptors and other nongame species, while the Milk River offers more than 10 miles of warm-water fishing opportunities. The property also contains important cultural, historical and paleontological resources.

The long-time ranch owners have expressed a willingness to sell the property to public agencies to maintain its open space, agricultural, historic and scientific values. The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation is proposing to acquire about 1,700 acres of grazing and dry crop land, along with an 80-acre irrigated hay meadow. This land meshes well with DNRC's existing ownership of some 4,000 additional acres in and around the ranch.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to acquire about 2,800 acres, including nearly all of the privately owned river bottom, along with the associated breaks habitat. Together with the DNRC holdings, an expanse of about 14 square miles would be available for habitat and public recreational access.

Public Involvement Process & Results: There has been no public involvement to date on this proposal. If the Commission endorses further work on the project, FWP will proceed with negotiations with the land owner and a public involvement process, including an environmental assessment and public hearing.

Alternatives and Analysis: Because of the landowner's interest in working with the public sector, FWP now has the opportunity to participate in a partnership project to achieve public ownership and stewardship of the natural resources of the Milk River Ranch, including important habitat and recreational benefits.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends Commission endorsement to allow the Department to further develop this project.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Commission endorse the Department's efforts to pursue the acquisition of 2,800 acres of the Milk River Ranch in Hill County.